

# **PARTICIPATORY PROCESS OF ORGANIZING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS**

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After they attained independence from the colonial rule, developing countries in many parts of the world took upon themselves the responsibility for national development including that of natural resources. After spending enormous resources that are scarce, the developing countries have slowly and painfully learnt for themselves as well as for the people, that government bureaucracy is not the right agency for developing local resources that are so diverse, as are the communities dependent on them. The paths of planned development are littered with such failed schemes, which when launched, were claimed to be panacea.

- Soil conservation, through vegetative barrier, advocated by the World Bank and adopted by Governments in India, has failed so miserably that in a recent survey in 90 villages, not a single vegetative barrier was found! Only the traditional earthen and small stone barriers are maintained by the farmers.
- Another example from the irrigation sector. For improving efficiency, the World Bank recommended rotational water supply prevalent in northern India, for adoption in other parts of India. In rotational water supply system, the outlets do not have gates and water automatically flows in turn to different parts of the command area, and therefore, it is claimed that it is more equitable and removes the harassment by vicious water distributors. Farmers in western India do not like this 'improvement' as the water flows are not related to the actual area farmers want to irrigate under different outlets. Under Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), when government canals are transferred to the Water Users Association, first thing they do is to install gates in the outlet structures. Government of Gujarat has also agreed to appoint a committee to look into the scope to improve the rotational water supply system with scope for farmers to present their experience and views.

Governments in many parts of the world are therefore now seeking to develop new partnerships with local communities. The motivation may be alleviating poverty or regenerating degraded lands or preserving biological diversity and may be economizing on government expenditure – but governments are increasingly seeking ways to encourage the local communities to organize into groups and take responsibility for planning the development and managing the resources that would satisfy their economic and social needs and therefore give them a sense of ownership of these resources.

Many countries including India that have gathered experience, usually with Non-Government Organization (NGO) initiatives, of development and management of local resources through community organizations are grappling with the issues of most appropriate manner of promoting community organizations and then scaling up participatory approaches and making it sustainable, less demanding of continuing support from development agencies. Public policies for natural resource management (NRM) have to deal with several issues while evolving an approach that would ensure sustainable management applicable to many areas which are environmentally and socio-economically diverse and fragile.

## **Self-Initiated Groups**

The most desirable are the self-initiated community organizations. Local communities have direct and highest stake in preservation and sustainable use of their resources. In fact, before the colonial powers extended their authority to the village level, the local communities were the careful custodians of the resources whether local forest or small irrigation reservoir. The self-initiated groups evolve a system of management with rights and obligations that the members approve and usually observe. Since many natural resources like forests and

other public lands and some water bodies are owned and controlled by Government, the self-initiated groups to function effectively and comfortably need an enabling legal system and friendly administrative processes.

- Self-initiated forest protection groups applied for recognition under the government scheme of Joint Forest Management (JFM). They were informed that JFM was only for protection of degraded forest land but the forest lands they were protecting were no longer degraded! The issue is not resolved for five years.
- Unregulated use of groundwater has resulted into its depletion to dangerous levels. With uncertainty of aquifer boundaries, community action at micro level has failed. Firm macro level legislative support and flexible administrative action are essential for community action to be effective.

However, experience has shown that until good number of examples are seen by local communities, they have to be encouraged and supported by outside development agencies in setting up their organization. The development agency should have and acquire more, the understanding about the importance of natural resources development in raising standards of rural communities, and appreciation for an skill in promoting group/community action for sustainable development and management of these resources.

### **1. Selection of Development Agency – Capacity Building of NGOs**

While NGOs have strength in social organizing they might be weak in technical areas. Again there may not be many NGOs active in natural resources management.

- For dealing with this problem in implementing participatory development of watershed programme, the Governments in India are providing financial assistance to NGOs not only for the project but also to cover their overheads; and arranging training for NGO personnel.
- Now Governments in India are planning for applying criteria for selection of NGOs and then to assign responsibility to NGOs depending upon their capacity for management and gradually assigning more responsibility if they exhibit more capacity.

### **2. Transforming Bureaucratic System**

Since there is paucity of NGOs in many countries for CBNRM, governments have to entrust large responsibility to government agencies. Here government faces other issues:

- Centralized system of decision making and control, not permitting flexibility that field officers require to meet the varying requirements of local communities.
- Most departments are single disciplinary (only engineers in irrigation department, foresters in forest departments) and do not have either the experience or personnel for social organizing.

For instance, when forest land is a sizable proportion of a watershed and the forest department agrees to implement watershed development, the participatory process is usually ignored. The department tries to manage without adding staff, which results in inadequate attention to community organizing processes.

A good indicator of implementation of participatory programme is the speed in taking decision at all levels. Delays are demoralizing for nascent community organizations.

All this amounts to transformation of the bureaucratic system. Changing from top down to participatory approach, ideally requires transforming present structures, systems, procedures, roles and relationships.

- The policy resolution issued in June 1995 by the Government of Gujarat on PIM had to be followed by 25 more detailed orders to facilitate functioning of the Water Users Association as a partner of the

irrigation department.

- The forest department in Gujarat has also realized that issuing proceedings of discussions in the working group on JFM are not enough. Eleven procedural matter have been identified on which detailed government orders are required to clarify to the field staff and JFM groups and NGOs. Subgroups of officials and NGOs are formed to prepare draft orders.
- The Government of India has realized that its guidelines on watershed, though excellent, are not enough. A recent study across the states has found that for want of necessary clarity, there are undesirable variations in practice in different states, and even in different districts within a state. It is decided to prepare a handbook dealing with selection of implementing agencies, selection of villages, accounting procedures, reporting and monitoring systems, etc. The challenge is to clarify only the essentials and leaving enough flexibility to take care of local variations.

Governments try to achieve this through decentralization and delegation of authority to local units. The reward and incentive system also requires to change favouring those who are pro-people and innovative. Fostering appropriate attitude and behaviour at the time of induction in government service and periodical orientation are essential.

- Recently Government of India appointed a Committee on Training for Watershed which has recommended setting up of more than 50 training centres at the state level and one for each district with arrangement for trainer's training.
- An important mechanism that keep Government programmes of CBNRM on healthy direction is appointment of Working Groups at national, state and district level with multi-source membership representing Government departments, NGOs, academics active in NRM field and of federations of NRMs - Community Based Organisations (CBOs). These Groups periodically review the progress in quantitative terms and qualitative parameters and appoint sub-groups/teams to study in depth important issues that emerge in their deliberations.

### **3. Monitoring, Learning and Refinement**

Whether government or non-governmental agencies, the key element for participatory approach is evolution of programmes, preferably based on pilot projects serving as learning laboratories, providing not a blueprint but an indicative framework with freedom to negotiate details with local communities – combining their experience and knowledge with the expertise of the agency. But the professional 'expertise' of the development agency may be a standardized package handed down by the researchers, not relevant to specific location.

- Recently, in an organized meeting between farmers' representatives of a drought-prone area and senior researchers working on millet crop, it was realized first time after 35 years of highly acclaimed research on millet that farmers in drought-prone areas want millet seeds that are good not only for grains but also for fodder!

Making research and extension people-centred has to be high on the agenda of CBNRM programme.

- In a recent national workshop on watershed development number of studies on ground realities brought out the need for refinement of the content and processes of the programme. One study brought out that less than 10% of landless families benefit from watershed development and about 1/3 of the grazers may have been harmed. One of the useful tools in the PRA kit for participatory planning is an exercise of 'who gains and who loses'. Continuous monitoring, learning and refinement are important for making the programme increasingly appropriate to meet varying requirements.

#### **4. Fostering Self-Reliance**

Community institutions will be sustained by members, overcoming their mutual mistrust when:

- Members realize short term benefits and appreciate long term benefits and therefore they want the benefits to continue;
- The marginalized and disadvantaged members have the position of dignity in the institution; and,
- The institution with strong democratic features, is perceived to function with fairness, to all in observance of rules and regulations. A subcommittee for enforcing discipline and resolving conflict has been found to be an useful instrument.

Women have a large stake in NRM. Women's self help groups that may start with regular savings and credit for consumption needs, quickly develop strength to provide small loans for small enterprises. Strong women groups give them confidence to forcefully present their special needs in local community organizations for NRM.

An important contributory factor for sustainability is diminishing financial assistance and support by development agencies. In the national watershed programme in India, the financial support and agency support are available for a project period limited to 4 years. Meanwhile the community institutions are expected to develop organizational and financial strength to continue the momentum.

- Experience of NGOs working in watershed programmes for ten years indicates the need for their continuing though diminishing support for 7-8 years. Even in other programmes, the CBOs would like a continuing relationship with and access to development agencies for dealing with external agencies like government organizations and banks.
- Meanwhile, CBOs can develop their strength to be self-reliant. Raising of development fund for maintenance and for future development provides confidence and 'own' resource for sustaining momentum. An important device, as in the case of national watershed programme, is to arrange flow of funds directly from government to CBO and not through development agencies. Advance payment of installment inspires confidence and spurs community organization to initiate early action.

#### **5. Federations**

There are promising experiences of developing federation of community organizations that acquire strengths of their own for providing services such as of credit, input supply, marketing and processing. The federation bodies can also develop access to external support. Government and NGOs would do well to support such developments, without making them their own outposts. Cooperative dairy development in India is a glorious success story.

#### **6. Legislative Route, Participating Route**

From pilot projects, to small scale implementation, to scaling up of the programme to cover good part of the country is a challenge that most of the programmes have to face. Since participation is not location neutral, nor scale neutral, expansion of a programme has to attempt reconciliation of micro level requirements with broad vision of macro level planners.

- One route could be legislative, as in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India which has by law transferred its irrigation projects to water users' associations.

- Transferring by law responsibility of natural resource management programmes to local government bodies could be similar move which on the face looks like devolution of government authority at local level. But as society is larger than government, so also there should be space and scope for variety of local institutions to meet variety of needs of different groups – let thousand flowers bloom rather than one overshadowing large banyan tree. Such functional groups will derive strength from and contribute to social capital. As the limitations of once commanding heights of public sector are realized, so would be the limitations of local bodies in assuming responsibility for a variety of developments at community level.
- Another route is creating demand through demonstration of successes and offering flexible support with scope for negotiating partnership terms with local communities. This is the approach favoured by most governments and NGOs. Though it is slow it has less chances of large-scale setbacks and wholesale reversals.